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Mayoral choice puts Newton in unique category

The Boston Globe

Few in city call race a factor, but Warren rounds out a trio



Mark Yesley of Newton said that when he voted for Barack Obama, Deval Patrick, and Setti Warren, race played no role in his decision. (Yoon S. Byun/Globe Staff)

By Kathleen Burge
Globe Staff / November 16, 2009

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NEWTON - When pastor Brandon T. Crowley talked politics during Sunday services after the local elections earlier this month at Myrtle Baptist Church, the congregation erupted in shouts of "hallelujah" and exultant clapping as members of this predominantly African-American congregation considered their unusual political lineup: a newly elected black mayor, a black governor, and a black president.

"I'm sure everyone had thought about that," Crowley said. "I was simply stating the obvious, that this is a time of celebration . . . that we were able as a country, as a state, as a city to triumph over the bitter bite of racism in this particular instance."

When Newton voters elected Setti Warren as their mayor Nov. 3, making him the city's first African-American mayor, they also created a cast of elected politicians that is unique in the United States.

Newton voters are alone nationwide in choosing an African-American for their mayor, governor, and president.

In some corners of this wealthy and liberal suburb, Warren's win over state Representative Ruth Balsler by 463 votes was greeted with little surprise or quiet pride. Newton is 88 percent white, but it is both solidly Democratic and liberal, and has repeatedly voted to reelect an openly gay congressman. But in other corners, Warren's election was met with unrestrained jubilation.

"To have three boys and to have that type of role model, I'm just totally excited," said Angela Pitter-Wright, a member of Myrtle Baptist who voted for

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Warren. “That they can see a mayor, a governor, all the way to president - I don’t know if that’s ever going to happen again but I’m glad it’s happening in their lifetime.”

Warren, a former aide to US Senator John Kerry, said his election, along with the victories of Governor Deval Patrick and President Barack Obama, represents racial progress. Warren ran on a platform of change, as a newcomer to politics who promised to get Newton’s finances in order, and race was rarely discussed.

“Race was not an issue during the campaign,” Warren said. “We’ve come this far in our society where this was not an issue.”

But once he won, Warren fielded calls from Obama, who had to phone twice because Warren was heading into a television interview the first time. Warren said he admires leaders like Patrick and Obama, and saw their campaigns as models for his own in. Both politicians reached out to build a broad base of supporters, he said.

“Both of them I admire because of the fact that they do not make decisions, political or otherwise, through the lens of race,” he said.

In 2006, 70 percent of Newton voters backed Patrick, the only elected black governor in the United States (New York’s David Paterson became governor when Eliot Spitzer resigned). And Obama won overwhelmingly in Newton, with 75 percent of the vote.

Gerry Chervinsky, a political consultant, pollster, and Newton resident, said race played a much larger role in the gubernatorial and presidential elections than in liberal Newton’s mayoral race.

“I think it’s really coincidental that there are African-Americans in all three of those offices,” he said. “Setti Warren didn’t win because he was African-American. He won because he represented change.”

Warren ran first as an outsider against Mayor David B. Cohen, and when Cohen decided not to seek reelection, he used the same strategy against Balser, a member of the state Legislature, Chervinsky said.

Mark Yesley, 72, said he voted for Warren, Patrick, and Obama, but race never played a role - not for him, nor, he believes, for Newton voters.

“None of them ran as the ‘black candidate,’” he said. “I think people felt they were the best candidates, and they were in the right place at the right time.”

Warren is not the only black mayor in Massachusetts, though he is the only one elected by voters. E. Denise Simmons was elected Cambridge’s mayor in 2008 by the City Council, according to that city’s procedure. She was preceded by another black mayor, Kenneth Reeves.

Some state officials believe Warren may be the first popularly elected black mayor in the state’s history, although no one seems sure. Secretary of State William Galvin said he believes Warren is the first directly elected mayor of a large Massachusetts city. State Representative Byron Rushing, a Democrat who represents parts of Boston and Cambridge, also said he believes Warren may be the first popularly elected African-American mayor, and in addition he mentioned William Lantigua, born in the Dominican Republic and voted mayor of Lawrence on the same night Warren won.

Lantigua has been hailed as the state’s first elected Latino mayor, but racial identity is complicated; witness discussion about Obama’s mixed heritage. Warren said one of his grandfathers was from Puerto Rico.

Warren’s election places him in the new generation of young black politicians, like Cory Booker, Newark mayor; Harold Ford, a former member of Congress from Tennessee, now head of the Democratic Leadership Council; Artur Davis, US Representative from Alabama; and Patrick.

Like many of the new wave of African-American politicians, Warren is too young to have participated in the civil rights movement. The mayor-elect is 39, and the father of a 17-month-old girl, Abigail. He graduated from a prestigious college - Boston College - and earned a law degree from Suffolk University Law School. Warren worked for former President Bill Clinton and Kerry, but has never before held elected office.

Warren is also an Iraq War veteran who postponed announcing his candidacy until he returned from his latest tour as a Naval intelligence specialist.

Across the nation, communities with a majority of white voters have long elected black mayors, first in the nation's largest cities: Harold Washington in Chicago, David Dinkins in New York City, and Willie Brown in San Francisco. Then, smaller cities and towns with white majorities also began to elect black mayors, said David Bositis, senior political analyst at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in Washington, D.C.

As black candidates seek offices where they represent a broader constituency, he said, they become more conservative.

"It's not as if they're becoming conservative, they way, say, Republicans are conservative," said Bositis. "But they are more conservative than, say, an African-American who's principally representing the interest of a majority black district."

Earlier this month on Election Day, Newton blogger Karen Wise observed the trio of black leaders Newton residents helped elect and posted pictures of each on her blog, verbatim. She marveled that for her three children, this was unremarkable.

"This is all they know," she said later. "In my lifetime, I wasn't sure I would ever see such a phenomenon. And here it is."

Wise voted for Warren, though she was undecided until she was in the voting booth, faced with the ballot. She was torn between the candidates but chose Warren hoping for change.

"I decided I liked the idea of something new," she said.

Louise Stebbins, 62, said she voted for Balser because she felt the state representative was more experienced and more familiar with Newton politics. But she said she didn't think race factored into the number of votes either candidate received.

She said of her fellow Newton voters: "I think a lot of us are colorblind."

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